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Tucson aims to become model for commuting

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Tucson: City where people leave the car at home (or park 'n' ride lot) and find another way to work.

Sounds outrageous, even entirely foreign.

But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Pima Association of Governments believe Tucson can become a model commuter city, a place where people ride buses or car pool to work. Or even don't show up at work at all.

Raytheon Missile Systems and IBM Storage Systems Division bought into EPA's Best Workplaces for Commuters program before the Tucson community formed its coalition in May to take a serious look at making Tucson businesses Best Workplaces.

Tuesday, the EPA will unveil a list of about 15 Tucson companies that meet its Best Workplaces standards. The ceremony will be at 10 a.m. at the Jim Click Hall of Champions directly behind the McKale Center at the University of Arizona.

These companies - the smallest with 53 employees - represent some 25,000 employees that have access to company-sponsored commuter programs.

These could be discounted or free bus passes, van or car pools, or telecommuting - where people work from home one or more days a week to stay off the roads.

Tucson becomes the sixth city/region partnering with the EPA and U.S. Department of Transportation in the Best Workplaces program.

The San Francisco Bay area became the first Best Workplaces region with an active coalition in 2001, followed by Denver/Boulder, Colo.; Washington, D.C.; Houston; New England; and Sacramento, Calif.

More than 2,000 employers in these cities with some 980,000 employees have joined the program, said Stephen Offutt, the program's manager at EPA.

"We would like commuter benefits to be as common as any benefits like health care or vacation," said Offutt, who rides his bike to work. "A good package of commuter benefits will get 15 to 30 percent of drive-alone commuters to change habits."

Raytheon has about 100 to 150 employees who get 50 percent discounted bus passes to ride the Sun Tran express buses and 25 employees who ride in van pools.

But Raytheon's biggest commuter program is the 9/80 work schedule, where 6,500 employees work only nine days in a two-week span.

"It eliminates one day every two weeks that you commute to work," said Ron Gonzales, Raytheon's commuter services administrator.

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IBM last year had 286 teleworkers in Tucson among its 1,600 employees. These people all worked from - or telecommuted - at least once a week, IBM spokeswoman Tiffany Van Gorder said.

To qualify with teleworking, a company must show 6 percent of the daily trips to work are offset by people working at home.

Pima Association of Governments built a Best Workplaces coalition with the Greater Tucson Economic Council RideShare, Sun Tran, the Tucson Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and the EPA.

"We are working with the EPA to qualify employers to meet the national standard of excellence," said Gayle Johnson, PAG's employer representative in the travel reduction program. "We've had great support."

Tucson is an early city in the Best Workplaces program for two reasons. The region sent people to a Association for Commuter Transportation convention in September in Philadelphia, where Offutt took note of Tucson's interest and willingness to work as a team.

"It was easier to pull together a group of people and get them to work together," Offutt said.

"One of the reasons we decided to work with Tucson is PAG is capable and enthusiastic and active. They have the capability to do this. Part of the reason was they were at the conference."